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Credibility lost: attempting to reclaim an expert identity in an HR professional context

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Abstract

Professional insecurity is a long standing concern within Human Resources (HR), with claims to expertise seen as critical to credibility. Considering HR as an epistemic community and drawing on the identity work literature we examine an identity threat to, and subsequent response by, a training and development (T&D) team. Based on ethnographic exposure to their practice, we explore how team members experience the threat and follow their attempts to re-establish their position in the local epistemic community, the HR department. We examine both individual and collective identity work, considering how both the identity threat and subsequent responses are embedded within training and development and HR practice more broadly. Through this analysis we offer academic insight on the nature of HR practice and the construction of claims to expertise.

Introduction

Professional identity work has been subject to much examination (Brown, 2014) yet this perspective has not yet been fully explored in studies of Human Resources (HR) (Jackson *et al.*, 2014). While Bolton and Muzio (2008:283) position HR as part of the 'aspiring professional project' of

management, concern for HR professionals' credibility and legitimacy headlines academic and practitioner reviews (Glover and Butler, 2012; Roche and Teague, 2012; Thompson, 2011). Here we explore training and development (T&D) as a practice enrolling both strategic and transactional aspects of HR work (Reilly *et al.*, 2007). Yet HR roles in such practice areas are increasingly ambiguous (McCracken and Heaton, 2012) and a potentially challenging context for HR professional identity work (Pritchard, 2010). Moreover, while there are many guides on delivering T&D (Harrison, 2005), less consideration is given to how this practice is mutually and reciprocally shaped by those performing the work, an area recently highlighted as a significant research gap (Jackson *et al.*, 2014).

Our empirical context is a T&D team within an HR department in an investment bank. We focus on the team's response to a perceived loss of credibility, triggered by the resignation of two expert members, and explore how they attempt to reclaim a professional, expert identity in the following months. Our observations were part of a larger study of this HR department (Pritchard, 2010; Pritchard and Symon, 2011) conducted with an interpretative ethnographic orientation (Yanow *et al.*, 2012). Ethnography has long been used to explore local understandings of expertise (Pritchard, 2011) though is less common in studies of identity work (McInnes and Corlett, 2012). Thus we further address calls for examination of everyday work within identity studies (McInnes and Corlett, 2012; Down and Reveley, 2009). Our interpretative research question was: how do these HR professionals attempt to reclaim an expert identity following a perceived loss of credibility?

To set the scene, we review contemporary understandings of situated expertise and the notion of an expert, professional identity, before positioning these in relation to the HR profession and T&D practice. We then outline our empirical approach before presenting our findings. In particular, we examine how the position of 'professional expert' and notions of 'expertise' were both disrupted and renegotiated (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) during our fieldwork.

Constructing professional (credible expert) identity

It is increasingly accepted that to be a professional is to construct and perform a 'credible expert' identity (Watson, 2010). Thus practice-based claims to specific expertise become critical for

professional credibility (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Expertise is situated within practice; locally in organisations and more broadly in the professional community (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Collins and Evans, 2008). From this perspective, being a credible expert is always in relation to particular practice(s): ‘first, an epistemic culture is made up of patterns of activities or daily practices; second, these practices are specific to particular fields; and third, they generate and certify knowledge’ (Kaplan, 2011:323). Being a credible expert is therefore part of the complex performance of professional identity (Brown, 2014). Such identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) becomes particularly challenging when professional and local (practice) contexts of the epistemic culture are unstable (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). However as Petriglieri noted ‘scant attention has been paid...to what happens in between an identity threat experience and its consequences’ (2011:642), highlighting the importance of context when expert identity is threatened.

Therefore, rather than investigating individual expertise from a psychological, cognitive perspective, (see for example, Dane, 2010), our work draws on the appreciation of the situated nature of expertise within epistemic communities (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Holzner and Marx, 1979) and related practice perspectives (Corradi *et al.*, 2010). This understanding builds on studies of science where it has long been recognised (e.g. Latour, 1987) that an expert is someone who is able to tell a convincing and compelling story (McInnes and Corlett, 2012). Within a local epistemic community (Knorr-Cetina, 1999), the warrant for expertise is the perception of the capability to practice (Corradi *et al.*, 2010), which is further supported by the epistemic culture (Brown and Duguid, 2001). As Davenport and Hall (2002:171) summarise, being an expert thus becomes to ‘comply with the norms of interaction and presentation’. This notion of enacting expertise is further developed by a consideration of identity work.

Identity work highlights that ‘people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:626). Such work is particularly prompted when identities are disrupted or threatened (Petriglieri, 2011). While practice perspectives might consider how this is embedded within the context of the epistemic culture (Kaplan, 2011), identity work researchers also ‘pay attention simultaneously to both self-definitions and the definitions of others’

(Ybema *et al.*, 2009:302). Others may be local (i.e. the immediate practice context) or more distant (e.g. the broader professional community).

Since they prompt identity work, identity threats have received specific attention (Brown, 2014). Petriglieri (2011:644) defines identity threat as ‘experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity’. Exploring the challenges of responding to identity threats and of unstable contexts more broadly, Beech (2011) applies the concept of liminality, (of being in-between) to suggest three individual strategies: experimentation (trying out through identity work), reflection (self-questioning), and recognition (that an identity is being projected onto the self). Beech proposes these individual responses are woven together within practice. Alternatively, McInnes and Corlett (2012) unpack identity work within meetings to propose five interaction strategies: performative (obliged to perform a particular identity), controlling (identity work is constrained within the interaction), reconciling (complementary identity positions), negotiating (adopt a variety of positions to try out different identities), and confirmatory (interactions reconfirm previous identity work). Both typologies highlight tensions, constraints and opportunities at play between a positioning of the self and adaptation and reaction to perceived obligations. This is evident in Beech’s distinction between ‘inside-out initiation’ and ‘outside-in reaction’ identity work (2011:290) and in McInnes and Corlett’s identification of ‘free’ as opposed to ‘constrained’ identity work along the dual axes of obligations and interpersonal ‘aspects’ (2012:30). While Beech unpacks individual identity work, McInnes and Corlett examine the interplay or co-construction within everyday talk where many ‘selves’ are at stake. Given our data offers both an opportunity to explore individual accounts and the collective identity work of the team, these frameworks provide a useful starting point for our own consideration of attempts to reclaim an expert identity over time. First, though, we consider the particular practice under investigation.

HR professionals and their expertise

Definitions of HR cover a range of activities taking place under the auspices of managing the employment relationship often, particularly in large organisations, performed by HR professionals (Watson, 2010; Thompson, 2011). Within the UK, the CIPD represents the HR profession; aiming to

‘champion better work and working lives’ whilst ‘driving business performance and shaping organisations’ (CIPD, 2013:1). As the UK professional body, they play a role in constructing HR professional identity, shaping HR epistemic culture and emphasising the importance of expertise. Thus expertise is positioned as essential to professional credibility and success (Guest and King, 2004).

With recent developments of HR role models (Pritchard, 2010), categories of HR professional (e.g. strategic and transactional) have become established in practice (Reilly *et al.*, 2007). This further impacts expectations about forms and/or levels of HR expertise. Specifically, Ulrich and colleagues’ classifications (e.g. Ulrich *et al.*, 2008 a, b) attract considerable interest (Reilly *et al.*, 2007). The strategic role of HR business partner often takes centre stage (Francis and Keegan, 2006) with significantly less attention paid to other roles. Our analysis addresses the related concern that ‘HR professionals have been largely missing from strategic HRM scholarship’ (Jackson *et al.*, 2014:46).

T&D practice, in particular, is seen as critical to the HR aim of ‘maximizing individual potential...equipping individuals to contribute’ to organisational performance (White and Bryson, 2013:389). Garrick’s (1998) study of Australian T&D professionals examined how learning was constructed and highlighted how HR professionals positioned their expertise as objective in relation to learning processes. Our research offers further insight into how the enactment of practices within the HR epistemic community shapes understandings of T&D and establishes understandings of expertise.

Our study

The T&D team comprised 15 staff, three of whom had transferred from HR generalist roles during the previous year and two of whom (the T&D senior manager and team leader) resigned within the first month of the fieldwork (see figure 1). The team were part of the 200-strong HR department of an investment bank which one year previously had adopted the ‘three legged stool model’ (Reilly *et al.* 2007:ix) with a shared-services group (including pay, benefits, and an HR call centre, Pritchard and Symon, 2011), HR expert teams (including employment relations, recruitment, compensation and T&D) and HR business partners (Pritchard, 2010).

Within the HR department, T&D were responsible for training, development and diversity, the latter having been assigned as part of the reorganisation (see figure 1). T&D worked closely with the business partners particularly to review performance management and develop T&D plans for each business area.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Fieldwork started a few weeks before the resignations of the T&D senior manager and team leader (see figure 1). The T&D senior manager was described as a ‘thought leader’ while the team leader had held that role for several years. Subsequently a dotted-line reporting relationship (to a business partner) was established but there was no day-to-day line management. This was described as a temporary arrangement driven by the financial cost of recruiting replacements though in principle day-to-day work was unchanged.

Fieldwork and data collection

Dismissing a witnessing ideal (Van Maanen 2006), we acknowledge the disrupted and incomplete nature of fieldwork (Pritchard, 2011), and indeed the resulting analysis. As is typical (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) fieldwork was both planned and opportunistic, involving participating in as many aspects of the T&D teams’ day-to-day practice as possible. During the main period of fieldwork, the first author spent an average of three days a week on-site. She participated in meetings, presentations, training sessions and conference calls of varying length; overall seventy such events were recorded whilst others were subject to detailed note taking. Documents including reports, job descriptions, presentations and emails were collected. Fieldnotes documented experiences, observations and reflections (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Ethical issues were reviewed regularly and approved by the appropriate institutional processes.

For this paper, data come from 12 individual interviews with T&D team members, averaging an hour, and 20 hours of recorded meetings, including five team planning meetings during the last six months of the fieldwork (see figure 1). Relevant material from other interviews within the HR

department is also incorporated. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on issues emergent from fieldwork experiences. Two tracer studies (Hornby and Symon, 1994) of T&D projects (innovation training and a management development programme) were conducted during fieldwork. These involved tracking project activity, talking to all those involved (including beyond the T&D team) and collecting related documentation. Data were organised, recorded material was professionally transcribed and this and other sources imported into NVivo. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Analysis

The first stage of analysis involved writing an initial ethnographic account using the fieldnotes. This facilitates sensemaking and allows research questions to emerge. Here we focus on one such question: how do these HR professionals attempt to reclaim an expert identity following a perceived loss of credibility?

The second stage of analysis involved a process of coding activities and actors across our data to identify all material relevant to T&D. This also enabled us to identify data by T&D team member allowing them to be followed across the fieldwork. In the third stage, we returned to the initial ethnographic account produced in stage 1 and conducted thematic analysis (King, 2012) using the research question as a guide. This highlighted the themes of losing credibility, justifying expertise and expertise embedded in (individual and collective) identity work as of key relevance. Stage 4 involved taking these themes and applying them to the data set identified in stage 2. This involved reading the data looking for patterns of similarities and differences in participants' identity work, which requires a balance of looking across the data whilst also maintaining a focus on individual journeys (Watson, 2011). The strategies identified by Beech (2011) and McInnes and Corlett (2012) were used as prompts while more detailed analysis was achieved via the practice of close reading. This allowed us to connect 'the actions and utterances of people in social settings with the cultures, discourses, narratives, and social, economic, and political structures within which those actions and utterances occur' (Watson, 2011:214). This requires a continual process of moving between the

broader ethnographic account and the more detailed analysis of specific data to refine and revise the analytic account.

Finally, interpretations were reviewed and discussed between the authors and conclusions were tested against fieldnotes and a reflexive log. One author took the role of critical friend requiring justification of the analysis to prompt further refinement of the findings. Through this process we identified the three key phases presented below as a means of organising our response to the research question: the HR department's reactions to the resignations, the team members' individual identity work, and, subsequently, their collective response.

Findings

We first consider the HR department's response to the resignations of the T&D experts. This acted as a trigger for the development of a threat to expert identity as the team's credibility came under scrutiny and other issues (newer team members and practice areas) were also enrolled. Unpacking this threat frames the response of the T&D team (both individually and collectively) that follows. Next, we explore the response of the individual T&D team members reviewing the strategies deployed in conversation with the first author. We present this as a discrete phase as we encountered these responses separately and prior to the later, collective response. At the time of the resignations, T&D team members were working on independent projects and with different business partners, so there was initially limited opportunity for a collective response. Moreover, without an active team leader regular team meetings did not take place for some time. Finally we consider the T&D team response, which developed over the following months when the team embarked on a series of planning meetings (see figure 1).

HR department react: T&D identity under threat.

Data highlight that the resignations were much discussed across the department. They triggered concerns that the T&D team was a risk to the local epistemic community, since problems in T&D practice might impact the credibility of the HR department more broadly. We found particular

concern about newer areas of practice (e.g. diversity) and perceived lack of experience of those who had joined the team from HR generalist roles the previous year.

Our analysis suggests this became a ‘big issue’, for example as an HR manager commented:

T&D is a big issue, there’s a big hole there...where they are now, we’ve got a number of people now without any experience (recorded HR meeting).

This ‘issue’ resulted in concern about whether the remaining T&D team could deliver the work allocated to the group. For example a senior HR manager highlighted these concerns, comparing newer team members with the departing experts:

The idea of using generalists is not necessarily going to work in T&D. You can move them across, train them till the cows come home and they won’t get it...you need more senior heavyweight people. (Interview, Senior HR Manager)

This espoused need for ‘senior, heavyweight people’ combines experience, reputation and hierarchical status to construct and position expertise and establishes the criteria for a T&D expert identity; an identity attributed those who have resigned. The three generalists who joined the team nearly a year previously cannot meet these criteria. Rather, their capability is limited to, in HR terms, transactional tasks. While the newer team members provided a stark contrast with the departing ‘senior, heavyweights’, we found here and elsewhere that such concerns about capability were extended to the team as a whole. That is, there was a sense of loss of expertise with the departure of senior members, but no sense of gain from the HR generalists.

The idea of a depleted T&D team as inexperienced and lacking expertise was also expressed by the senior business partners within the HR department who, as members of the leadership team, played a significant role in the local epistemic community. Indeed only one individual T&D team member was recognised as having ‘some expert background’ while others were described as ‘very junior people and rebadged generalists’. The overall team was thus constructed as lacking expertise:

‘...they can do some stuff, they can do some thinking about stuff, they can deliver papers for, you know, performance management and they can do some great work around that.
(Interview, Business Partner)

A direct relationship was established between lack of expertise and the inability of any T&D team member to represent the profession to the wider organisation. The whole T&D team is thus positioned in a transactional role and an expert identity is out of reach:

I couldn't take them to a meeting with [business leader]; they are never going to be able to influence his thinking around this stuff. (Interview, Business Partner)

We suggest that this assessment by others in the HR department, triggered by the resignations of two senior members, presents an identity threat to the T&D team as a whole. Their response is an attempt to reconstruct an expert identity both individually and collectively, which we explore below.

T&D respond: individual constructions of an expert identity.

In an interview, an established team member, Alice, highlighted her frustration with others' perceptions of the team: 'what are we seen as, just support for the business partners because they can't be bothered to do something'. Thus we suggest that much individual identity work is prompted by what Beech (2011:290) terms an 'outside-in reaction'; here there is 'recognition' that a non-expert (transactional) identity has been proposed but this is rejected, as explored below.

Ella, also an experienced team member, acknowledged and then reframed the identity threat as a misunderstanding, a strategy others also deployed. She recognised the threat and the need to re-establish her professional identity by attempting to provide evidence of appropriate practice:

The credibility we have as a team hasn't been great...we have to keep telling people the good work we're doing...I'm constantly sending my work to [senior HR manager]...to try and convince her that what we're doing is good stuff...I'm researching more, I'm reading more...I think it puts pressure on individuals to prove, to be seen as the development expert.
(Interview, Ella)

Talking to the first author, Ella sounded frustrated about needing to 'constantly...convince' others in HR despite having worked in the team for several years. She provides additional, alternative warrants (research and reading) to support her claim avoiding other practice-based attributes (e.g. seniority and experience) that were identified as critical by others. Thus Ella not only appears to reject concerns

about the T&D's credibility but also provides a basis for contesting the comparison with the departed experts.

As one of the team that had transferred from an HR generalist role, Fiona might be regarded as more exposed to the identity threat. She also adopted the strategy of presenting her work as an example of effective T&D practice and explained how she, both individually and with support of others, could be therefore regarded as an expert:

She talked about management development and made frequent reference to “deploying business knowledge” from her previous role: “I haven’t necessarily got theoretical experience but I have the business knowledge to know what would work, what would appeal”. She commented that lacking theoretical knowledge wasn’t an issue because she could “use the expertise of the team”. She also suggested that a lot of what was required was consultancy skills and emphasised the importance of practical considerations: “clearly the business want something practical and not too fluffy”. (Field notes, discussion with Fiona)

Using Beech's (2011) terms, Fiona both reflects and experiments as she relates her prior experience to T&D practice. Given others' comments regarding the problematic nature of this transition, her construction-through-mapping is particularly significant. A combination of business knowledge and skills is positioned as essential to a ‘practical’ T&D solution, legitimising Fiona's expertise and experience in relation to T&D practice. This alternative warrant was positioned as positive for the organisation; delivering ‘what will work’ rather than something ‘too fluffy’. Fiona also explicitly enrolled others in proposing that, despite the recent resignations, the necessary expertise existed within the team, working up a positive alternative positioning since the team ‘can’ offer business, practical and theoretical expertise.

Spending time with the team, we noticed that the relatively new practice area of diversity was also highlighted as a concern following the resignations. Here, Adam (a longstanding team member who had taken on responsibility for diversity) discussed his work, recognising some parameters of the HR expert (e.g. a timely response) but was able to justify an alternative account:

A, it's a huge area, B, its relatively new and C, no-one has got really real qualifications in it, so a lot of it is personal experience or personal knowledge...I'm conscious that I can't always

necessarily meet people's expectations straightaway...because I think, well actually I've never been asked that before. (Interview, Adam)

Adam invoked the complexity of diversity work to inoculate against the potential criticism that his experience is insufficient to warrant expertise; no one can possibly have achieved this as the area is new and without a valid qualification base. Using Beech's terms (2011), Adam was experimenting by building a three part justification whilst also appearing to reflect on the issues of performing the expert identity in practice. Furthermore, he challenged the idea that T&D expertise must be developed over time, given he was confronting novel situations. In this way Adam attempted to re-construct and re-position T&D practice such that it enabled him to adopt an expert identity in relation to his diversity work.

These examples were drawn from our extensive time with the T&D team in the field, during which they frequently discussed their frustration with how they were regarded by others in the HR department. In response to this identity threat, which we suggest was triggered by the departure of the senior experts, we find evidence of Beech's three strategies of liminal identity work (2011): experimentation, reflection and recognition in each of the examples above. We suggest the significance is in how they are deployed in the specific context of expert identity work as individuals both manoeuvred within, and challenged, previous constructions of expertise.

Rather than opening themselves up to unfavourable social comparisons with the departed experts alternative constructions of the situation, their practice, and warrants for expertise were enrolled. These were attempts to reclaim expertise and to circumvent comparisons that others in the HR department had set up.

Such constructions, while apparently successful in discussions with an outsider (first author), might be more open to challenge within the local epistemic community. Reviewing field notes from this time suggests the T&D team maintained a broadly optimistic stance that others in HR department would eventually acknowledge their day-to-day work as evidence of expertise and as a warrant for their expert identity. However, over time we observed that concerns did not subside and, when the opportunity arose for the team to work together, they embarked on a collective process of identity work.

T&D team respond: Collective production of expert identity.

Approximately six months after the resignations, the T&D team organised several planning meetings looking forward to the coming year. These meetings took place at somewhat irregular intervals during the remaining fieldwork. Based on the experience of attending these meetings, we suggest that the team both worked through and worked up joint claims for expertise within a particular aspect of T&D practice; planning to meet development needs identified in the organisation's performance review process.

At no point during these meetings did we observe or encounter any reference to the resignations. Perhaps the risk of an unfavourable comparison with 'lost' expertise might disrupt the team's emergent identity work. Instead, the T&D team constructed and negotiated their position as experts in the diagnosis and resolution of the organisation's development needs. They did this through the enactment of a necessary diagnostic practice required for T&D professionals; planning how to meet the organisation's development needs identified via performance reviews. For each extract we highlight how the identity work undertaken could be mapped to McInnes and Corlett's (2012) interaction strategies, summarised in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In their first meeting the team positioned this T&D practice as business as usual and indirectly rejecting the identity threat. Work continues as if the resignations had not happened:

Alice: *Shall we very quickly go round and update on what the development themes are for each area. Do you want to kick off?* [to Ben]

Ben: *Yeah, um, obviously, change, so from the manager's perspective it will be change leadership; from an employee perspective, change management. Um, performance management for managers, in terms of managing individuals...and basic management skills.*

Anna: [laughing] *basic management, hah hah...*

(Team planning meeting)

Alice's opening constructed this process as taken for granted, framing the team's identity work. This could be seen as an example of either controlling identity work as other team members may find it difficult to adopt alternative position, or as performative identity work as she enacts the credible HR expert. The outcome was that development themes were 'quickly' listed and co-constructed as 'obvious'. The notion of 'basic management skills' became a repeated (and somewhat humorous) development issue as the team went through each department in this first meeting. In this early exchange, the team reconfirmed a commitment to an expert identity (both individually and collectively), rejecting the attempt to impose a (non-expert) administrative identity by others in the HR department.

By the end of the first meeting the team had identified seven T&D priorities, and in doing so had worked up a claim for the capability to diagnose and plan development activity. During the second meeting, the team moved on to discuss these priority areas in detail. For example, a discussion on leadership was introduced by Anna, and the practice of diagnosis legitimised as the group built a shared understanding of the problem, constructing a profile of employees with leadership development needs:

Anna: is that [leadership] at all levels or a specific level, 'cos the [meetings] I was in, I think with Ella, they're doing, they're not leading, now they're [senior managers] they should be leading and they don't, is it that?

Ben: exactly, they're lacking drive, it's lacking drive, they're not stepping up and thinking "right, I'm going to lead it"

(Team planning meeting)

This provides another example of confirmatory identity work as Anna enrolled Ella so that her opening claim became based on their shared experience. At this stage joint expert claims may have been more robust as the team was still working to stabilise their claim to an expert identity. During turn taking individual team members had the opportunity to display their own, and acknowledge others', expert performances. We suggest that this was confirmatory identity work as expertise, an understanding of a development problem, was both acknowledged and developed as the discussion

proceeded. Particularly, during the second and third planning meetings we found many examples of such positive reinforcement amongst the team.

Once the development needs had been mapped out, the third and fourth meetings focused on identifying solutions, which took the profession-relevant form of development initiatives. Development became tangible as a product, which might then provide concrete evidence of the team's expertise.

These discussions also enabled the team to position themselves relative to T&D solutions. It was at this point, for the first time during observation of the meetings, that the T&D team encountered a problem; uncertainty about their warrant to perform certain roles. Rather than the previous positive and confirmatory exchanges, these positions were negotiated (see table 1) as they worked out how to position themselves in relation to the solutions they developed. For example, coaching networks were endorsed as a T&D solution drawn from experience (practice), albeit vicariously.

Anna initially highlighted both resources and expertise as concerns before negotiating an acceptable expert position:

Anna: we can't do coaching externally and we can't coach ourselves, 'cos there's not enough of us; I don't know if we've got the skills to coach, well it depends what they need coaching on, um, then could we set up a coaching network...

Fiona: some areas have that, some have set up...a networking group, an after course group...I'm trying to think where...but that's a really good idea.

Anna: ...it would be a shorter, defined amount of time [than mentoring] um, have a target...do it for three months and meet every week, whatever...our role would be to set up a framework, then we'd need a process of making sure people were actually good at whatever they were offering

Claire: well you need standards and you need controls.

(Team planning meeting)

Anna works her way through different potential role-related identities before, in conjunction with Fiona and Claire, establishing a T&D expert role that includes setting up, monitoring, and controlling the coaching network.

Having mapped out many T&D initiatives (including coaching networks as illustrated above), the team met to discuss delivery and became concerned with their position within the HR department. Keeping control became critical and the team attempted to work up a distinct expert identity in relation to the rest of HR, especially the business partners. This led to an extensive discussion that reversed the earlier positioning of the team by the business partners:

Talking with some business partners, they jump directly into a solution...and you have to stop them [laughs]... (Claire, team planning meeting)

Claire positioned herself as the expert who knows how to proceed while simultaneously constructing the business partner as naïve. The business partners thus became positioned as the non-expert ‘others’ against which the T&D team confirmed their own expert identity. This is an interesting example of performative identity work, as the need to re-establish their position within the HR department required the team to reframe their relationship with other HR roles. This resulted in an attempted reversal of the earlier identity threat in which the business partners devalued the T&D team’s expertise.

The team then debated dissemination and implementation. The risk of delivery failure was discussed, as this would pose a critical threat to expert identity both with the local HR community and the organisation:

Fiona: I don’t think we should give business partners all this information, I think it’s more they need to come to us

Anna: we need to control it

Fiona: these are things we’re working on, it’s more of our communication with them so they know what we’re doing as a team...it has to be managed quite carefully...

Claire: ‘cos we’re worried about volumes then?

(ctd. below, team planning meeting)

Once again we see negotiating identity work as the team confirmed their ownership of the T&D initiatives. Fiona started with an individual positioning but shifted to ‘we’ and ‘us’, since team identity was critical in relation to the rest of the HR department.

The tool 'being used wrongly' was constructed as a risk due to a lack of appropriate expertise on the part of others. This was compounded when Fiona suggested that handing over the tool would result in an administrative role for the team, a key issue in relation to the original identity threat. This potential for relegation to an administrative role would undermine the constructed and negotiated identity as experts worked up by the team throughout this series of meetings. The challenge was to translate this into a robust position in respect to others in the HR department:

...(ctd. from above)

Fiona: *well not just that, about-*

Anna: *not delivering?*

Fiona: *not, well, resources but also about-*

Claire: *it being used wrongly?*

Fiona: *the business partners, where we are currently with them, just go off and think "right this is something" and they would have sorted it out with the business and then they'll come back to us and say "right can you administer that", yep and that's not what we're here for.*

(Team planning meeting)

Through raising the client service risk the HR business partners are once again constructed as non-expert offering the T&D team an opportunity to compare themselves and claim a favourable position of expertise; they can provide the correct solution. This also offered an appropriate rationale for control since it operationalised a shared concern within the local HR community; the need to avoid a client service issue. This is an example of performative identity work, as the T&D team used the broader epistemic culture of the HR profession to frame these roles:

Ella: *we need to balance [communication] with them jumping to conclusions.*

First author: *who?*

Fiona: *the Business Partners*

Ella: *so we don't want them to use the knowledge and bypass us....so if they think its peer coaching they'll go straight to that, give the manager and actually peer coaching isn't the thing they need.*

(Team planning meeting)

Overall we suggest that the team used the planning meetings to develop a shared account of capability to undertake ‘real’ T&D work, as ‘experts’, working through potential threats to this identity and making social comparisons against the positions of others as non-experts. Returning to the summary presented earlier (see table 1) it is not simply the absence or presence of these strategies that is interesting, but how they are deployed within the practice of T&D as the team attempt to develop a robust expert identity to repel the perceived identity threat.

After the last meeting attended the T&D team failed to schedule subsequent sessions, and work to produce the development solutions seemed to stall. Indeed, there was not another planning meeting during fieldwork and although there was some follow up of the ideas (development tools were drafted) these were not implemented. We offer two potential interpretations of these events. Firstly it might be that the only required outcome of the planning meetings was for the group to counter the identity threat, at least amongst themselves. In discussing and working through this process, they were able to justify and reconstruct their expert identity. Second, it might be that it became clear to the team members that the work done within the team was not robust enough to expose to the scrutiny of others in the HR department and so they abandoned that particular approach. This highlights the precarious nature of identity which is constantly in the making and rarely secured for long.

Discussion and conclusion

Set against the backdrop of HR professional insecurity, the need to secure the right to practice through establishing credible expertise and increasing divides between strategic and transactional HR roles, we examined the T&D teams’ attempts to reclaim an expert identity following a perceived loss of credibility. We first explored the identity threat within the local epistemic community, the HR department, before following the team’s response with an initial focus on individual identity work prior to a phase of collective, interactive identity work within team meetings. Applying the notion of identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011) we examined how participants’ identity work reflects the individual strategies suggested by Beech (2011) and interactive strategies suggested by McInnes and Corlett (2012).

Our first observation relates to the production of identity threat, an aspect rarely examined longitudinally within practice (Petriglieri, 2011). While the expert resignations triggered the threat, this subsequently encompassed concerns about the generalist transfers and diversity work. This suggests that identity threats might be temporally unpredictable and require a critical mass before they are felt (Beech, 2011). Moreover, we noted that while the threat might have been initially targeted it subsequently impacted the whole T&D team whose (individual and collective) claims to expertise became difficult to sustain. It is important to consider that the identity threat itself was embedded within (and an outcome of) other HR professionals identity work, as they constructed their own expert position securing entitlement to assess the T&D team's credibility (see also Pritchard, 2010; Pritchard and Symon, 2011). Thus the threat was embedded within local epistemic community, the HR department, but also deployed professional debates about strategic and transactional HR roles (Thompson, 2011) within T&D practice.

In examining how they attempted to reclaim an expert identity, we found that the T&D team members initially responded individually, justifying their experience and providing alternative warrants. Looking at the ways in which the team members recognize, reflect and experiment (Beech, 2011) when talking to the first author we find a rejection of the non-expert identity, avoidance of comparison with the departed experts, and a generally positive stance since they believed they would overcome the identity threat. Their individual identity work was clearly situated within the specific local and broader HR professional context as the team members worked through the challenge of achieving an expert T&D identity in respect to the HR department more broadly (Glover and Butler, 2012). Moving to the team meetings, we find highly dynamic and interactive identity work, rather than the more considered presentation to the first author of the individual accounts. We located the interactive strategies deployed, finding examples of all those identified by McInnes and Corlett (2012) and noting their evolution over time (see Table 1). In contrast to their empirical context of a multi-disciplinary meeting our data is taken from discussions within the T&D team. Thus 'other' identities and 'others' expectations are imagined, sometimes ignored and sometimes (particularly latterly) made

present in the dialogue. Once included in the dialogue, these others (particularly the HR business partners) play a critical foil for the T&D teams own identity work since (unlike the departed experts) they cannot be ignored within the everyday practice context of their work. Thus while the social context is present in different ways in the individual and collective identity work, its impact is nevertheless significant in both (Brown, 2014).

Here we have offered an important practice-based perspective of how the T&D team's identity work plays out over time in response to an identity threat that was critical to their position within the HR department. This enables an explication of the ebbs and flows of identity work and an understanding of the (empirical) interaction between the immediate (team), local (HR department), and professional contexts. From this perspective we aim to open up a conversation which reflects Brown's (2014:14) observation that as a concept identity work has been 'largely unappreciated utility as a means of bridging levels of analysis in organization studies research'. Offering a perspective of both individual and interactive identity work within the context of the different experiences of the HR epistemic culture in this empirical context is hopefully a step towards such an appreciation.

This leads us to consider the HR professional context of our research. As reviewed at the outset, the HR professional identity is oft depicted as problematic (Glover and Butler, 2012). Recently there has been particular emphasis on categorizing HR roles along a dimension from strategic to transactional with the former presented as a more positive, even glamorous identity (Pritchard, 2010). This contrast lies at the heart of this identity threat; the T&D team resisted an administrative, transactional, non-expert positioning and sought to achieve a more credible, expert, strategic identity. In both the construction of the threat and in the teams' attempts to reclaim their expert identity there appears to be professional competition (particularly with the HR business partners). From this perspective HR role models present difficulties in practice (Pritchard, 2010; Pritchard and Symon, 2011). There was more at stake for these HR professionals than simply reclaiming an expert identity within their team. Their expert performance must be made visible to the local epistemic community who must acknowledge this as evidence of expertise (Kaplan, 2011). Without such acknowledgement, the identity threat

remains. Within their planning meetings the claim to expertise and the delivery of practice were worked up in tandem; they at once constructed development problems and needs requiring expert diagnosis and solutions and presented the solutions, constructed the tools to solve the problems and meet the needs.

By producing HR solutions, the team thus constructed tangible evidence to support their claim to an expert identity. This finding complicates the oft discussed strategy-practice relationship within HR (Jackson *et al.* 2014). Here HR practice is in part embedded in, and constructed through, the identity work of these HR professionals, rather than entirely predicated on or derived from organisational requirements. This offers a counter-point to discussions of 'how to' deliver T&D since these offer idealised accounts which ignore the day-to-day framing of HR practice and of HR professionals themselves (Watson, 2010). As Jackson *et al.* suggest (2014:49): 'effective HRM requires much more than evidence of a possible empirical relationship between HRM practices and firm performance: changing an HRM system to one prescribed by the empirical evidence requires navigating changes in the roles and identities of HR professionals'. Our work is one small step in this regard, though we acknowledge its limitations given our focus on one specific area of HR practice and one particular organisational context. Future research that expands the range of practices under consideration and extends the range of organisational contexts considered would offer the opportunity for further development of these ideas.

In summary, we found both individual and collective identity work undertaken as these HR professionals attempted to reclaim an expert identity. This involved direct counters to the identity threat both within their individual identity work, as they offered alternative accounts of their expertise, and in the identity work embedded within their collective practice. Expertise is recognised as the ability to demonstrate, to enact, relevant and appropriate knowledge and practice. Recognition is granted from within the community and the recognition then serves as a warrant to legitimate the claim to expertise. After the resignations, the team had to re-enact the necessary and sufficient

practice in order to be re-warranted. Our observations offer both academic insight and a useful basis for further development of understanding of HR practice.

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Figure 1: Research and Event Time Line

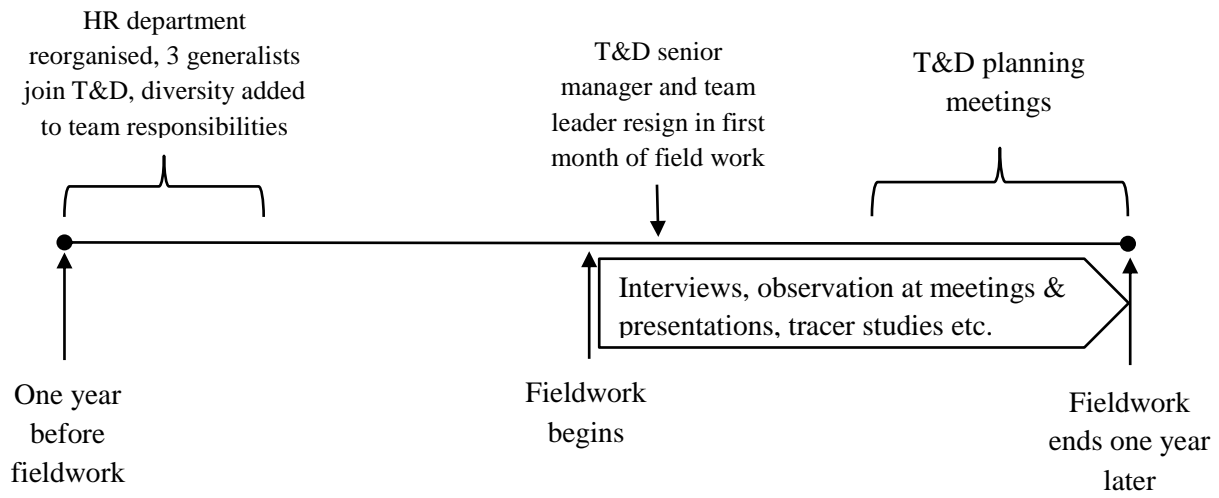


Table 1: Map to McInnes and Corlett (2012) interaction strategies

Extract	Interaction strategies	Observations
1: Launch of planning meetings, identifying development needs	Controlling/Performative Confirmatory	Team discussions are framed on the assumption of their expert status. Expert claims are reinforced and shared.
2: Development needs are constructed (e.g. leadership)	Confirmatory	Team build shared understandings of development needs.
3: Solutions to Development needs are proposed (e.g. coaching networks)	Negotiating Confirmatory	Different roles in respect to the solutions are identified. Need for HR expert role is reinforced.
4/5/6/7: Approaches to implementing solutions proposed, relationship with business partners is examined	Confirmatory Performative Negotiating/Reconciling	Need for lead role is identified and confirmed. Team acknowledge how their role is positioned by others Positioning vis-à-vis business partners is worked through.